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SUBJECT: RELIGIOUS GROUPS AND AKP VIE TO WIN THE HEARTS AND MINDS OF TURKEY,S KURDS

REF: ANKARA 390

Classified By: Consul General Sharon A. Wiener for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary. A visiting USG research group met with intellectuals and think tanks in Istanbul on March 5-9 to discuss the developing relationship between the government of Turkey (GOT) and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Various observers told them the religiously conservative Turkish Kurdish population is poorly represented by the Marxist-Leninist separatist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and its affiliated Democratic Society Party (DTP), leaving room for religious groups like the Fetullah Gulen movement (FG), Turkish Hizballah, Sunni tarikats, and the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) to gain political and social influence in the region. By contrast, Kurdish intellectual Umit Firat and Armenian journalist Etyen Mahcupyan shared that attendees at the February 15-16 Abant Platform meeting in Erbil concluded that secular democracy, rather than religion, was the best umbrella under which to unify the divided Kurds in the region. These debates parallel the larger question of "neo-Ottomanism" and the nature of Turkey's role in the Middle East. End Summary.

Fetullah Gulen and the Kurds

¶2. (C) Writer and analyst Gareth Jenkins of the Jamestown Foundation noted the PKK and DTP are both very secular organizations and not representative of the majority of Kurds, who are religiously conservative. He thinks this disconnect between the population and its purported military and political leadership leaves room for religious organizations like Turkish Hizballah (outlawed), FG, nominally illegal religious orders called tarikats, and the AKP, to lay claim to the role of Kurdish representative. Jenkins explained Turkish Hizballah now has seven NGO branches focused on community outreach and service, and no overt military component. Should a party like the AKP play a unifying religious card to gain support and votes in the southeast, it would have to compete with the religiously-oriented organization of the Turkish Hizballah, which has traditionally been anti-PKK. Additionally, he suggested if FG were to utilize its social power in the political arena, the Kurds would abandon the AKP for FG, given FG's waxing influence in the region. Commenting on the impact of Gulen's eventual death on the FG organization (he is 68 years old and reportedly in poor health), Jenkins said Gulen's demise would only serve to increase his mystique and strengthen the appeal of his organization, as does his current self-imposed exile in the United States.

¶3. (C) Jenkins also noted Sunni tarikats are now competing

with the AKP and FG for civil society power in the southeast, especially following Erdogan's recent weakened ties with the Iskender Pasa tarikat. He said tarikats such as the Naksibendi and Iskender Pasa view Fetullah Gulen - the individual - as a religious upstart and do not take him seriously as a theologian. Jenkins said the tarikats consider themselves comparable to the "Catholic Church in Italy," and view FG as merely a "self-proclaimed Pentecostal pastor."

Unifying the Kurds at the Abant Platform: Religion or the West

¶14. (C) According to Kurdish intellectual and Helsinki Citizens Committee member Umit Firat, there is a palpable sense of division within the Kurdish population in the KRG - so much so that there are two or more incumbent ministers in some ministries. Firat attended the February 15-16 Abant Platform (a series of dialogues organized by the Fetullah Gulen movement to address dispute resolution) in Erbil and found the event useful not for the issues addressed but as an "aperture for dialogue" among the divided Kurdish population. He said the participants included attendees from Selahadin University and Kurdish Mukryani Institution in Erbil, representatives from Massoud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), and a few individuals from the Sulaymaniya region closer to Iran. (Note: "Agos" editor-in-chief and Abant participant Etyen Mahcupyan said President Talibani and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) sent no representatives to the event. End note.) Firat said he was encouraged by the message of goodwill given by Turkish Consul

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General in Mosul Avni Botsali. Firat reported that Botsali said the border between Iraq and Turkey was in truth the border between Iraq and Europe, and Iraqis should view the border as an open door to the democratic world, not just a window.

¶15. (C) Among the topics discussed at Abant was the role of religion as a unifying factor for the Kurdish population. Firat said some attendees, including him, found the proposal unrealistic. He pointed to the Middle East, which has twenty distinct countries and the same religion. Clearly, he concluded, religion alone is not enough to unify. Firat suggested that because Turkey has more in common with the West than other Muslim countries, a secular democracy would be a more appropriate umbrella under which the Kurds could find shelter. Mahcupyan also concluded from the discussion in Erbil that Kurds do not want to be seen as a part of the Middle East. He noted that for the Kurds, "anything that will happen must be done through the West."

Neo-Ottomanism

¶16. (C) Gareth Jenkins and Etyen Mahcupyan both touched on the different forms of neo-Ottomanism (defined by columnist Omer Taspinar and others as "soft" Turkish influence in former Ottoman territories) promoted by the FG camp as well as the AKP. According to Jenkins, FG's efforts at spreading a distinctly Turkish form of Islam represents an Ottoman nostalgia that Gulen himself would contend all Muslims would want -- as evidenced by the popularity of Gulenist schools and FG inter-faith-dialogue programming. Mahcupyan, however, said that Prime Minister Erdogan is promoting neo-Ottomanism by pushing for a Pax Ottomana in the region, with Turkey at the head as the "big brother." These two approaches appeal to different factions -- the first to the "milliyetciler" (the religious nationalists), and the second to the "ulusalciler" (non-religious nationalists).

¶7. (C) In responding to questions about the potential for future EU reforms in Turkey, Ulgen said AKP abandoned reforms after its 47 percent win in the 2007 general elections because the image of being a party of reform was then no longer needed to maintain legitimacy. However, Ulgun and Mahcupyan, as well as Dilek Kurban from TESEV, expressed confidence the AKP would continue to pursue reforms, such as an amnesty package, to address the Kurdish issue and seek constitutional changes toward this end. Mahcupyan sees pressure toward human rights-focused reforms coming from a rising conservative middle class in Turkey with a greater awareness of human rights. Currently such demands are not reflected in AKP legislation because AKP MPs are even more conservative than the roots of the party, he contended.

¶8. (C) Comment. Religious organizations like the Fetullah Gulen movement are increasingly active in the southeast in an attempt to win over Islamist Kurds. While countering the PKK has proven dangerous, sufficient support among civil society Kurds may allow for the birth of a new, more religious representative of the Kurdish population the involvement of the "common" Kurd versus the "leftist intellectual" Kurd. With its own religious identity, the AKP may be able to further consolidate its support base in the southeast should it push for amnesty and constitutional reforms after the municipal elections. Interestingly, none of the interlocutors mentioned the influence of the conservative religious Saadet Party among the Kurdish population and Saadet's potential role as an election spoiler for AKP in the region (Ref A). End Comment.

Wiener